

Taking Care--Documenting the Occupational Culture of Home Care Workers
Archie Green Fellows Project, 2014-2015
(AFC 2014/021: 01461)
Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**Sally K. Cumberworth interview, 2014-12-16 : interview conducted by
Michael Robert Bussel**

INTERVIEW LOG

00: 00:33: Born in Roseburg, Oregon in 1959. Lives in Cave Junction, Oregon. Has five children. Went into home care after getting divorced. Allowed her to remain in her community.

00:01:57: Other jobs: Has degree in accounting. Owned trucking business with former husband and kept books. After divorce, needed work. Had cared for grandparents when younger. Has been caregiver since 1994.

00:03:05: Types of clients: paraplegics, shut-ins. For those living in remote locations, only person they saw. Had client for ten years with developmental disabilities. Now has two persons she cares for consistently.

00:05:14: Caregiving offers chance to give back. Nurturing person. In office, you have desk, set hours, know your job. Caregiving...you take to heart. Help people to live independently until the time they need greater care.

00:06:51: Special skills needed: must love to care. Not just a paycheck. Stay in community and give back to people who have worked all their lives. Can't treat caregiving like punching a time clock. Must be honest. Negotiation over work that clients demand and what state will allow.

00:09:57: People are lonely. Want companionship. Become like family but must set boundaries. People want to give you gifts or presents but not allowed.

00:11:39: Emotional involvement tough, especially when people pass away. Take time to grieve. If people go into a home, will ask if you'll stop by to visit. Separation is part of the job. Take time off in these cases before taking on a new client.

00:13:34: See people naked, it doesn't get any more intimate. Learn about their kids, families. They tell you all their stories. You become a "vessel" for stories about their lives.

00:14:32: Learn to be detached when you help people with intimate activities. Clean up accidents. People must trust you with their bodily functions. One woman didn't like taking baths. Made it into a "spa day." Give people choices. Giving them dignity is huge. Offer clues, reminders, without yelling.

00:17:52: Learn things over time. Different clients require different strategies. People can still fold laundry or sweep from a wheelchair. Encourages them to do things. Home care commission has wonderful classes.

00:20:19: Learn clients' preference for how they want tasks to be done. Hard for people to have someone in their home. They don't know how to be a "boss." Negotiate with them on how they want tasks to be done.

00:23:15: People lose pieces of themselves. Don't make a big deal out of what they can't do. Capitalize on things they can still do.

00:23:55: Family members sometimes ask caregivers to do things for them in addition to caring for client. Task list may differ from family expectations.

00:27:40: Families mostly respect and appreciate work. One of scariest moments: woman in her care died while they were having a conversation. Briefly revived her, then she died.

00:29:27: Typical day: get client ready for day. Has lung problem — takes time to get ready. Check blood sugar, prepare breakfast. Do laundry, cleaning, take to appointments.

00:31:00: Depression is huge. Clients want companionship, someone to talk to. Important to maintain a positive attitude.

00:31:39: Stories clients tell are wonderful. Learn about history. They also ask about my life. Live vicariously through my experience and that of my family. Clients live in remote places, often get few visitors. My experience gives them something else to think about.

00:33:49: Reads mail for clients with bad vision. Have to keep personal information confidential. In small town, people pump you for information.

00:35:49: Humor: must laugh at yourself. If something goes wrong, try to turn it around. Don't want to dump your problems on someone and have them worry about you.

00:40:30: Clients sometimes angry and hurting. Can take it out on you. Must be like duck and let it pour off you. Can't internalize. Sometimes you are not a good fit with a client and need to leave.

00:42:15: Caregiving can be thankless, but is also gratifying. Family acknowledged her work at eulogy for client who had died. Difficult when you get attached. Had one client who loved to see her kids perform, came to her home for holidays. Often clients don't get better. Lady I take care of now regularly expresses appreciation.

00:46:15: Goes ballroom dancing with one client on Friday afternoons.

00:47:05: Union organizer had to come to her house three times before she joined. Didn't see union connection immediately. Husband volunteered her to be phone tree captain. Then elected to bargaining committee and has been on bargaining team for first five contracts.

00:51:15: Importance of workers' compensation. Huge to get it for workers who get hurt on the job.

00:52:51: Important to protect hours one can spend with clients. Case of mother-in-law who didn't qualify for services.

00:56:04: Spoke to legislators about budget and moved them. Client would have been in foster care rather than at home without her caring for him. Can live in dignity at home and is cheaper than foster care. Can't make decisions in foster care. Lose humanity when being told what to do.

00:58:59: Personal support client asked "When can I be in the union?" Took him to Salem on lobby day. Told legislators his story. Loves to tell people she is his "employee." Has his own purple SEIU T-shirt. Went to all bargaining sessions.

01:02:25: Asked for gloves in bargaining. Asked "don't you carry gloves?" Decorated office with purple gloves. "Land of perfect": retire and everything is wonderful. People in Salem not wiping bottoms or helping people choose between pink and blue outfit. Job takes a lot out of me.

01:04:59: When hours are cut, doesn't show appreciation. People fought in world wars, worked hard all their lives. Couldn't get dignity and respect language in first contract. In land of perfect—all get respect.

01:06:10: People with disabled children shouldn't have less. What makes people happy is being in their homes. In nursing home: most you have is picture on the wall, have to share bathroom. Not living life to best of your ability.

01:08:35: Keep people in home as long as possible. Happy, surrounded by memories. Pets are huge. Love you unconditionally.

01:10:29: Leisure activities: goes dancing. Has five children, thirteen grandchildren. Has animals, does gardening.

01:12:55: Second son has cystic fibrosis. Has been a caregiver all her life and a nurturer. Taking care of people is what I love to do. Book work didn't "fill me."

01:16:08: Job path has enriched my life. Stories I have heard: one client a concert pianist, another a longshoreman who put his life on the line to get a union.

01:17:08: Chicago was place where seven people and an SEIU organizer began home care organizing. Told it couldn't be done. Got "Trailblazer" award for her work and felt like she had won a Tony. "Invisible No More" T-shirts made. Got living wage for doing work that lots of people don't see as important. Paid days off, too.

01:24:20: End of interview.